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Re-Fighting the Vietnam War

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In 1967, when I was a reporter for this newspaper attempting to cover the Pentagon, I became aware of a fierce dispute between the Central Intelligence Agency and the military over the size of the enemy forces in Vietnam. Analysts held meetings in Honolulu, Washington and Saigon attempting to resolve their differences. The CIA thought the enemy forces were a lot bigger than the Army did, or said it did.

I never was able to get to the bottom of the argument and eventually went on to other things. I didn't know then that the dispute was going to turn into an industry, with magazine articles, a congressional hearing, a CBS Reports television show called "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception," a TV Guide cover story about that program called "Anatomy of a Smear," an internal CBS investigation of the TV Guide charges that became public, a \$120 million libel suit by Gen. William Westmoreland—the U.S. commander

in Vietnam—against CBS, and now a book expanding upon the TV Guide charges, entitled "A Matter of Honor," by Don Kowet (Macmillan, 317 pages, \$16.95).

Even before publication, the book has stirred up a storm. At least 10 of the CBS people who appear in it wrote, in apparently orchestrated responses, to Mr. Kowet or Macmillan disputing the accuracy of his reporting (which produced its own small ironies: CBS correspondent Mike Wallace, complaining of errors big and small, misspelled Mr. Kowet's name). Macmillan was quick to charge CBS, itself a publisher, with a "shocking attempt" to chill publication of the book.

The dispute aired in CBS's January 1982 broadcast wasn't new. For 15 years a monomaniacal young CIA analyst, Samuel A. Adams, had been charging that the military "cooked the books" on its estimates of the enemy in order to fool the public and maybe the administration about its progress in the war, and that the CIA eventually went along with the lower figures. Mr. Adams argued that the enemy forces were at least 500,000, maybe 600,000 in 1967; the military claimed the numbers were half that.

His charges surfaced in a 1975 article in Harper's magazine. His editor for that article was a man named George Crile. Seven years later Mr. Crile would produce the CBS Reports documentary; Sam Adams was the consultant to the program, and it was his research that provided the backbone of the show.

But CBS's program went beyond what might seem like an argument over arcane intelligence issues. In his usual accusatory tone, correspondent Mike Wallace said, "The fact is that we Americans were misinformed about the nature and the size of the enemy we were facing, and tonight we're going to present evidence of what we have come to believe was a conscious effort—indeed, a conspiracy at the highest level of American military intelligence—to suppress and alter critical intelligence on the enemy in the year leading up to the Tet offensive."

A conspiracy is an illegal act. And it was the conspiracy charge that prompted Gen. Westmoreland to file his suit. CBS helped him with a notable self-inflicted wound. Van Gordon Sauter, the CBS News president, in a memorandum on the internal investigation, said it would have been a better broadcast "if it had not used the word conspiracy." That was all the general needed to mount a suit.

When his lawyer eventually forced CBS to disgorge the full report—the so-called Benjamin Report—there was even more ammunition. Burton Benjamin, the veteran CBS producer who conducted the investigation, had a clutch of criticisms about his network's program, most significantly that "a 'conspiracy,' given the accepted definition of the word, was not proved."

And it confirmed that a flock of CBS News's ethical guidelines had been violated: Sam Adams was identified as a consultant, but not a paid consultant (although it is hard to believe viewers thought Mr. Adams was working for the fun of it); George Allen, a senior CIA man in Vietnam and a key witness on the show, was interviewed twice because the first interview was stilted, and he was shown interviews of other participants; sympathetic witnesses were "coddled"; no one tried to interview Gen. Philip Davidson, head of military intelligence in Vietnam during part of the period in question.

In short, CBS did a shoddy job. And that confirmed nicely much of what Mr. Kowet's TV Guide piece charged in its investigation of whether CBS had violated its own ethical guidelines. But the book goes further. It attempts to show not only that there was no conspiracy—but that there was no "cooking of the books," through conspiracy or otherwise.

One of the ironies of a situation abounding in them is that for a book about jour-

nalistic ethics, "A Matter of Honor" leaves a lot to be desired. One major problem is the book's technique: There is an omniscient narrator, which leaves a reader unable to determine the accuracy of many of the "reconstructed" conversations.

Participants in many flatly deny them. Mr. Kowet says that "all reconstructed conversations and direct quotes are either from interviews, depositions, or affidavits," but it is impossible in many cases to determine which; there are no notes. One key source was a disaffected editor named Ira Klein who George Crile says "bears a well known animus toward me." In some cases where Mr. Klein was obviously the source of a conversation, other participants have denied the quotations. One of the most important, related in convincing detail, has Sam Adams saying after the broadcast: "We have to come clean. We have to make a statement. The premise of the show was inaccurate." Mr. Kowet names four people at that meeting: Mr. Adams; Kent Garrett, a CBS producer; Phyllis Hurwitz, an editor; and Mr. Klein. Mr. Adams denies he said it. Mr. Garrett has an entirely different account. Miss Hurwitz is vague about it.

There are other similar examples.

The book also has niggling errors that don't give a reader confidence. George Crile's ex-wife is Joseph Alsop's stepdaughter, not his daughter; Terrence O'Flaherty is the television columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle, not the San Diego Chronicle; Harry Reasoner, not

Mike Wallace, was the "Calendar" anchor. And the ethical issues go on and on: Mr. Kowet lambastes Mr. Crile for taping a telephone conversation with Robert McNamara, former secretary of defense, without permission (and CBS suspended him for that). But Mr. Kowet taped telephone interviews with CBS employees (at least one under an "off-the-record" agreement), which he has now, in an ethically controversial move, handed over to Gen. Westmoreland's lawyers under subpoena. (And even more: Sally Bedell Smith, co-author of TV Guide's "Anatomy of a Smear," joined the New York Times, where she soon was covering the CBS-Westmoreland affair—evenhandedly, one assumes.)